

NUTRITION

The High-Protein Hype

Are carbohydrates really making Americans fat? A recent study at Duke University found that people on a high-protein, low carbohydrate diet for six months lost more weight than people following a traditional, moderately low-fat diet. On average, those eating a high-protein diet lost 31 pounds compared to only 20 pounds for the other group.

Health experts, however, remain unconvinced about the benefits of eating a high-protein diet. Weight loss in the study could be explained by the monotony of eating so much meat and eggs, which are filling. Consequently, those on the high-protein diet ate 100 fewer calories a day than the others. Over six months, that daily difference adds up to about five pounds. Water loss could also be a factor. The breakdown of extra protein leaves a lot of nitrogen in the body that must be removed. Unfortunately, it's fat loss – not water loss- that counts.

Long-Term Effects Unknown

Although cholesterol levels did not rise among those eating a high-protein diet at Duke University, many studies show that cholesterol levels increase with diets high in saturated fat. But even if blood cholesterol levels don't rise, that doesn't make this diet healthy. High-fat meals damage blood vessels by reducing blood levels of nitric oxide, which is important for many body functions, such as transporting oxygen to the tissues. Excess dietary fat is also considered to promote cancer development.

Eating a large amount of protein in itself is also a cause for concern. When protein is digested, the remnants must be filtered and excreted by the kidneys, which increases calcium in the urine. This raises the risk of kidney stones and increases the risk of bone loss. A high-protein diet is not safe for those at risk for kidney disease or kidney stones, including anyone with diabetes. Finally, experts question the healthiness of a low-carbohydrate diet because it severely limits well-known cancer fighters: vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans. If people ate at least five servings of fruit and vegetables a day, cancer rates could drop by 20 percent.

Lose Weight and Fight Cancer

For those concerned about weight loss, the best current advice is to reduce portion size and increase physical activity. In addition, switching to a mostly plant based diet can enhance an effort to lose weight, as well as fight cancer. Not only do plant-based foods contain substances that strengthen the body's natural mechanisms for combating disease, they are also low in calories, so weight control is easier.



STATE HEALTH PLAN PREVENTION PARTNERS
South Carolina Budget and Control Board
Employee Insurance Program
June 2003

